

Bryan Gray's Opening Address to the SCPnet Conference 2009

Regional Development Agencies were established 10 years ago in 1999 with a remit to promote "sustainable economic development". I have always believed strongly that the first of those three words, sustainable, is the most important and the most difficult. It is sad to reflect that future generations may look back on the period of 50 years or so after the Second World War and call it "the consumer society". Sadly, "consumer society" is an all too accurate a description of the world we have created. Of course there have been a huge number of important developments and our quality of life has been transformed. However this has now developed to an extreme position as can be characterised as a world where we buy things we cannot afford and do not truly need only to throw them away in holes in the ground thus creating an environmental problem.

This unsustainable cycle has been apparent at least since the 1960s and the "Club of Rome" report. I fully expected that this unsustainable cycle would be broken by the environmental movement. In practice the cycle has been broken by the credit crunch, but the effect is the same. I hope that good will come from this as we realise how unsustainable our economy had become.

This then presents the challenge of how we maintain our standard of living, and continue to generate wealth which can be used for wider benefit if we reduce our reliance on producing "stuff". My belief is that we should focus on quality of experience and shift away from reliance on things we do not truly need. My period as Chairman of Liverpool's year as Capital of Culture in 2008 brought home to me the importance of experience, in this case culture, and its economic impact. We carried out an economic assessment which demonstrated that Capital of Culture contributed approximately £800 million to the economy. This arose from people visiting, experiencing, staying in hotels and enjoying the environment of Liverpool and the wider North West. Of course there is an element of consumption in this but much less so than buying consumer goods.

A prime responsibility of the RDA is to produce a Regional Economic Strategy. I believe the North West has led the way in focusing on quality of life as one of our key drivers. This has led to us investing in culture, heritage and regeneration to improve the quality of our built environment and our rural areas. Tourism and culture are significant contributors to the North West economy and we have a growing interest in media (for example at MediaCityUK) and the creative sector in its widest sense.

I have yet to meet a Chief Executive who does not regard growth as a company objective. Equally I suspect that every country in the world has an aspiration for economic growth. Yet this cannot be sustainable anymore than the growth in credit or the unsustainable usage of resources. We should ask ourselves: "**Can we contemplate zero growth?**" We need to be radical and consider how to achieve sustainable development without continually driving economic growth. John Ruskin said "*There is no wealth but life*". Our challenge is to put more emphasis on the quality of life and less emphasis on pure economic wealth.

It would be unrealistic to believe that a focus on "experience" and "quality of life" will transform our economy and consumer behaviour. However I do think a radical shift is required.

I welcome the work of SCPnet and hope that these thoughts give some encouragement to your work. It is particularly important that we have consistent data across the regions. There is always a tension between independence at regional level and the need for consistency. I strongly support co-operation to ensure that national and regional data are consistent. There is a good history of collaboration between regional development agencies and I hope this collaboration for a common cause can be achieved.